

Everything shipshape for Hunter



The GB team, with Neil Hunter on board, in action in San Francisco as part of the Sail GP series

SAILING STEWART FISHER

IT is quite a course Neil Hunter has charted for himself since he first set sail from Lamlash on the Isle of Arran.

The 23-year-old is Scotland's sole participant in the Sail GP series, the closest thing to Formula 1 on the waves, featuring catamarans capable of top speeds of 100km an hour, and after Sydney and San Francisco, next stop is New York, before a home leg in Cowes in August and a big finale in the waters off Marseille.

Once that is out of the way, Hunter will begin an assault on the 2021 Americas Cup in Auckland as part of team Ineos UK.

That will be the Scot's second taste of the most famous race in sailing, having been the youngest participant in 2017, living out his boyhood dreams as he became part of a crew that featured Ben Ainslie.

"I was brought up around boats from a very young age," Hunter said. "My mum was part of the first women's team to sail round the world, she did the Whitbread round-the-world race in '89-'90 and my dad is also a professional sailor, he delivers people's boats and stuff.

"So it was kind of natural that I would be into sailing. I grew up around boats and obviously living in Lamlash I was always near the water.

"I couldn't really put a finger on the first time I was in a boat, I just can't remember not being in one.

"My family had a cruising yacht

from pretty much when I was born so we used to go cruising up the West Coast of Scotland, then my dad bought me a dinghy when I was two, we used to go sailing in that, then when I was old enough I would go sailing in it on my own."

As groundings go, it doesn't get much more hard core than sailing each day in the icy cold and frequently choppy waters off the west of Scotland in winter. This child prodigy has become grateful for his tough paper round.

"I guess sailing in Scotland in winter, if that is your norm, it makes you fairly tough compared to some of the people you are competing against," says Hunter. "It develops your sailing a lot when you are exposed to extremes like that very early in your career.

"For sure it was pretty cool to be the youngest out there in the 2017 Americas Cup. It had been a dream of mine since I was young but I guess it is every sailor's dream to compete in the America's Cup.

"Ultimately the race for us, it was a bit of a disappointment, we got a few things wrong in our design and we ended up getting knocked out in the semi-finals and the qualifiers.

"But just to get my first Americas Cup knocked off by the age of 22 was pretty awesome, particularly when I was sailing with some of my heroes."

In Sail GP, Hunter is a grinder – a gruelling task which combines athleticism and precision in a sport where a moment's hesitation can have severe consequences.



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"Sail GP is a new class this year, we are sailing the fastest boats in the world, at speeds up to 100km an hour, six nations pitted against each other, five venues around the world," he says. "At the end of the year, the winner, takes a million dollars' prize money.

"It has revolutionised the crowd side of things, with all the racing close to the shore, they have really taken it to the spectators. It is live streamed on facebook and on the sail GP app.

They are really trying to turn it into a spectator sport.

"Our expectations with the GB team for the season were to be competitive come the last race in Marseille. We have a very inexperienced team compared to others, so to be winning races in the second event is very pleasing.

"I am a grinder, which basically means trimming sails and turning handles. A huge part of my job now is gym work, staying physically fit so two sessions a day, six days a week. It is as full on as any other athletic sport. It has gone from being a sit-down sport to having some of the top athletes in the world being needed to power these boats. I also have a bit of a more technical job, trimming the front sail.

"For sure there have been a few capsizes. In the extreme sailing series, we capsized a couple of times in Sydney. These boats are so full on, so on the edge the whole time, that sad things do happen. The potential is so high for having an absolute mare all the time."

It is high-end, professional sport, a different pathway to the one he might have taken.

"I was part of the British Olympic squad on the pathway to the Olympics with my brother, but when I was 18 I got offered a job by Ben Ainslie for the last Americas Cup, so at that point I had to decide what route I was going to go down," Hunter says. "So competing at the Olympics is not something which is currently on my radar, but it could potentially come back in the future."

